

# New records and distribution extensions of three species of *Mesoclemmys* Gray, 1863 (Testudines: Chelidae) in Mato Grosso state, Brazil, with observations on terrestrial movements

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**ABSTRACT:** Distribution patterns of most of the 20 Neotropical freshwater turtles belonging to the family Chelidae are usually based on few locality records. We here report on vouchered records of three species of the chelid genus *Mesoclemmys* in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso. Presence of *M. vanderhaegei* is confirmed for the Amazon River Basin, and *M. gibba* and *M. raniceps* are recorded in Mato Grosso for the first time.

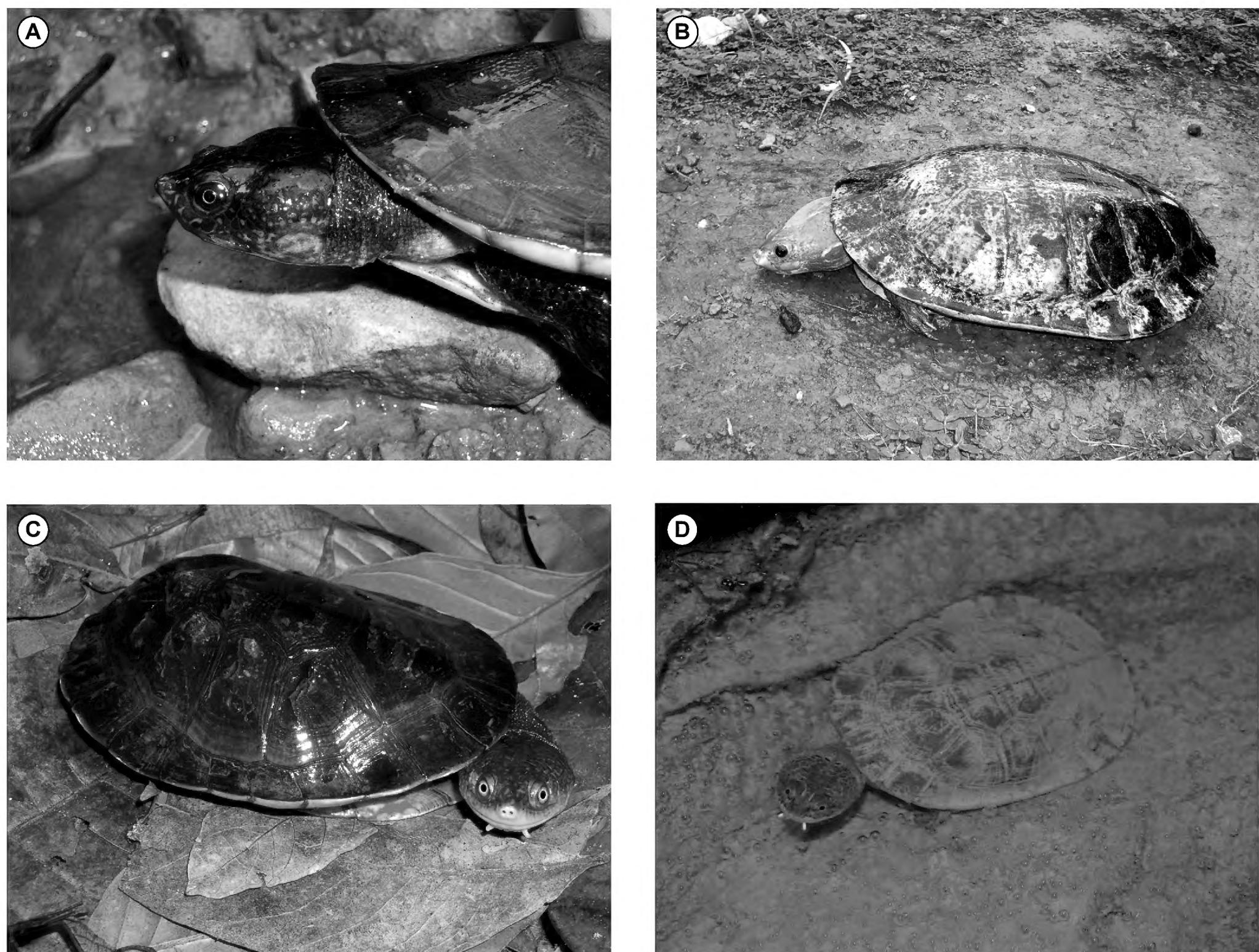
Although studies on Neotropical freshwater turtles have increased during the last years, several species are still poorly known, especially in regard to distributional records that are limited to a few localities. Among these are most of Brazilian freshwater turtles of the family Chelidae (Souza 2004; 2005). It presently comprises 20 species, eight of which belong to the genus *Mesoclemmys* (Bérnilds and Costa 2011). Up to now, only one species in this genus (*M. vanderhaegei*) is positively recorded for the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, which encompasses the headwaters of two major South American river basins: Amazon and Plata. We here present new locality records and range extensions for three species of *Mesoclemmys* (Figure 1) in Mato Grosso. We also call attention to the ability of these turtles to occasionally migrate across land, between aquatic habitats or even between distinct watersheds.

Previous records of the Vanderhaege's toad-headed turtle *Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei* (Bour, 1973) in Brazil refer mainly to localities belonging to the Parana-Paraguay River sub-basins of the Plata River Basin (e.g., Iverson 1992; Souza *et al.* 2000; Strüssmann 2000; Strüssmann *et al.* 2000; Brandão *et al.* 2002; Bour and Zaher 2005). Besides Mato Grosso, known records of *M. vanderhaegei* include the states of Mato Grosso do Sul and São Paulo. The species was also recorded in the São Francisco River Basin, in Minas Gerais State (Silveira 2009), and in streams of the southeastern portion of the Amazon River Basin (Araguaia-Tocantins sub-basin), in the states of Tocantins and Goiás (Brandão *et al.* 2002; Villaça 2004). Nevertheless, these Amazonian records were not considered by Bour and Zaher (2005), who revised the distribution of the genus

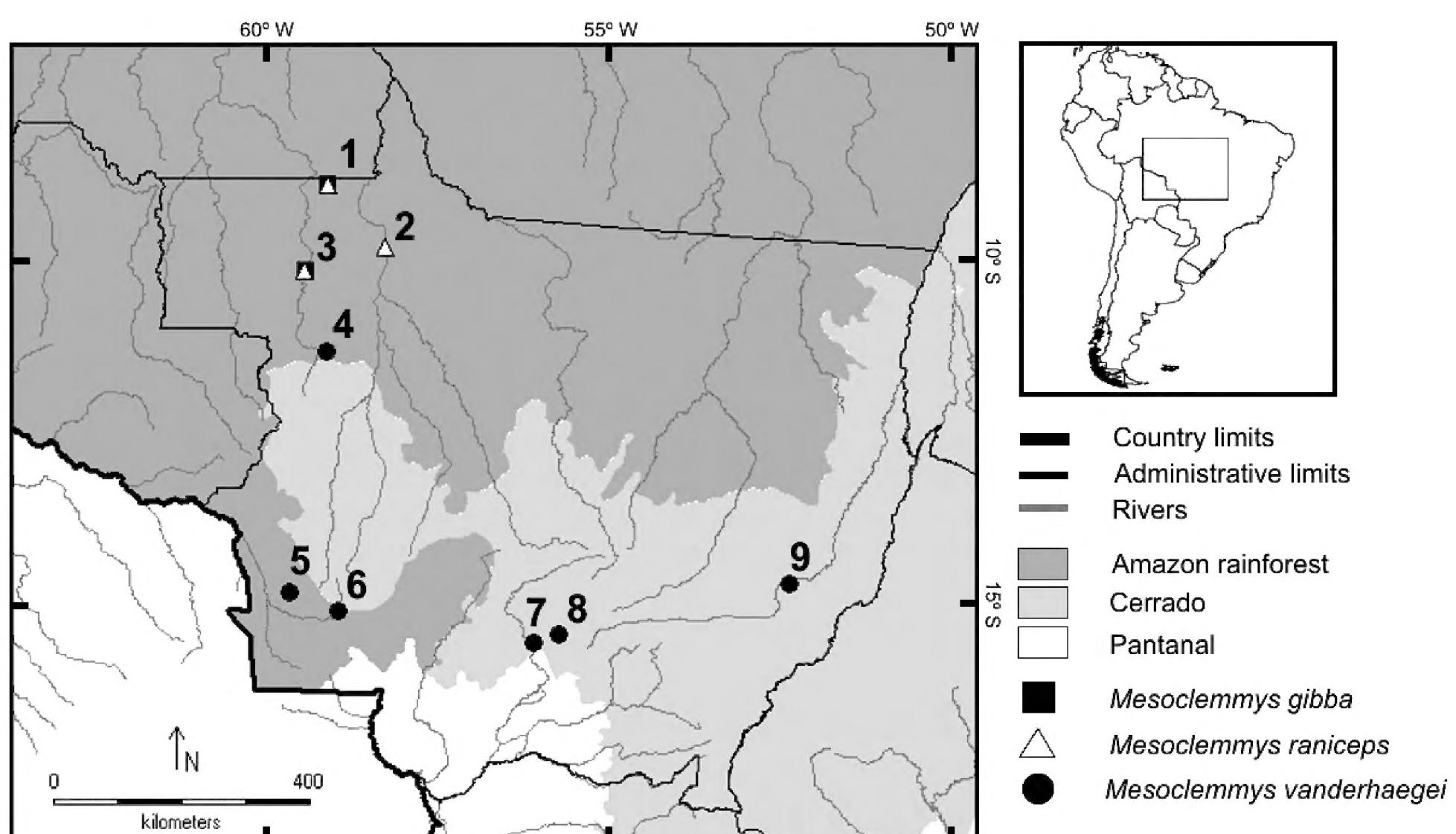
## *Mesoclemmys*.

Species identifications followed keys and diagnoses in Ernst and Barbour (1989), Pritchard and Trebbau (1984) and Rueda-Almonacid *et al.* (2007). As a tool for identification, we also provide (Table 1) measurements of carapace length (CL), head width (HW), and ratio between HW and CL, for some of the specimens of *Mesoclemmys* referred herein. Vouchers are deposited in the Coleção Zoológica de Vertebrados of the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso (UFMT, Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, Brazil).

We here report seven records of the presence of *M. vanderhaegei* in Mato Grosso rivers belonging to three distinct Amazonian sub-basins (Guaporé-Madeira, Juruena-Tapajós, and Araguaia-Tocantins) of the southern section of the Amazon River Basin (Figure 2). In the municipality Vale de São Domingos, southwestern Mato Grosso, an adult individual of *M. vanderhaegei* (UFMT 1625) was captured on 30/May/2002. It was crossing an unpaved road near the Guaporé River hydroelectric powerplant (UHE Guaporé; 15°07' S, 58°57' W). In the municipality Vila Bela da Santíssima Trindade, two specimens (a juvenile, UFMT 8423, and two adults, UFMT 8767; UFMT 8768) were captured on 14/March/2008, in a small stream impoundment of a gold mining project (Projeto São Francisco) in the top of Serra da Borda (14°51' S, 59°39' W). In the same locality and habitat, another juvenile (UFMT 8565) was collected on 17/April/2010. River courses from Vale de São Domingos and from Vila Bela da Santíssima Trindade both belong to the Upper Guaporé River Basin. Guaporé River is an affluent of the Madeira River, a major contributor of the right margin of the Amazon River.



**FIGURE 1.** Representatives of the species of *Mesoclemmys* treated herein, in life. (A) *Mesoclemmys gibba* (UFMT 6245) from Parque Estadual Igarapés do Juruena, municipality Colniza; (B) *Mesoclemmys raniceps* (UFMT 4888) from municipality Aripuanã; (C-D) *Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei*, adult and juvenile specimens, respectively, from Projeto São Francisco, Serra da Borda, municipality Vila Bela da Santíssima Trindade.



**FIGURE 2.** Locality records in Mato Grosso state, Brazil, mentioned in the text for representatives of the genus *Mesoclemmys*. *Mesoclemmys gibba*: 1) Colniza, 3) Aripuanã; *Mesoclemmys raniceps*: 1) Colniza, 2) Cotriguaçu, 3) Aripuanã; *Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei*: 4) Juína, 5) Vila Bela da Santíssima Trindade, 6) Vale de São Domingos, 7) Cuiabá, 8) Chapada dos Guimarães, 9) Nova Xavantina.

**TABLE 1.** Carapace length (CL) and head width (HW), in mm, and ratio between HW and CL in selected specimens of *Mesoclemmys* from Mato Grosso State, Brazil. U – unsexed; F – female; M – male.

| UFMT | SPECIES                         | CL    | HW   | RATIO HW/CL | AGE/SEX |
|------|---------------------------------|-------|------|-------------|---------|
| 8423 | <i>Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei</i> | 81.1  | 17.7 | 0.218       | U       |
| 8568 | <i>Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei</i> | 162.1 | 31.0 | 0.191       | M       |
| 8667 | <i>Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei</i> | 173.3 | 33.4 | 0.192       | M       |
| 8764 | <i>Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei</i> | 171.5 | 33.9 | 0.197       | F       |
| 6245 | <i>Mesoclemmys gibba</i>        | 95.6  | 20.5 | 0.214       | U       |
| 6244 | <i>Mesoclemmys gibba</i>        | 82.7  | 17.8 | 0.215       | U       |
| 6868 | <i>Mesoclemmys gibba</i>        | 145.7 | 28.3 | 0.194       | M       |
| 4888 | <i>Mesoclemmys raniceps</i>     | 228.2 | 73.3 | 0.321       | F       |
| 9086 | <i>Mesoclemmys raniceps</i>     | 77.9  | 20.8 | 0.267       | U       |
| 9085 | <i>Mesoclemmys raniceps</i>     | 87.6  | 22.4 | 0.255       | U       |

In the municipality Juína, an adult of *M. vanderhaegei* (UFMT 6056) was captured on 04/December/2006, while crossing an unpaved road near the Juruena River (11°20' S, 59°07' W). This is a main affluent of the Tapajós River, also a major contributor of the right margin of the Amazon River.

In the municipality Nova Xavantina, an adult female (UFMT 8764) was captured on 16/April/2003, in a pitfall trap amidst a sandy area covered by open vegetation ("cerrado sentido restrito", *sensu* Ribeiro and Walter, 1998). The pitfall was installed near the margins of the small and olygotrophic Bacaba stream (14°43' S, 52°21' W). Bacaba is an affluent of the Mortes River, which belongs to the Araguaia-Tocantins sub-basin. To our knowledge, this is the southernmost record of that species in this sub-basin.

Presence of *M. vanderhaegei* was also recorded in both natural and urban areas of two municipalities in southern Mato Grosso (Figure 2), amidst Cerrado (Brazilian's second largest ecosystem, covering most of Central Brazil). On 23/December/2004, during the local dry season, a juvenile of *M. vanderhaegei* (not collected) was found crossing a sandy, unpaved road inside the National Park of Chapada dos Guimarães, mostly situated in the municipality Chapada dos Guimarães. Also in December/2004, a juvenile specimen (UFMT 1787) was found road killed on a paved street of the urban area of Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso State. On 20/April/2010, in the same municipality, an adult female (UFMT 8564) was found at an urban site still covered by "cerrado sentido restrito" vegetation.

Two additional species of the genus *Mesoclemmys* are herein reported to be present in the state of Mato Grosso (Figure 2): *Mesoclemmys gibba* (Schweigger, 1812) and *Mesoclemmys raniceps* (Gray, 1855). The first species is widely distributed in the Orinoco River and the Amazon River basins, in Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Trinidad, and northern Bolivia and Brazil (Bour and Zaher 2005 and references therein; Rueda-Almonacid *et al.* 2007; Vogt 2008; Ferronato *et al.* 2010).

Little is known on the distribution of *M. gibba* in Brazil. Confirmed records in Brazil are limited to the states of Amazonas (Schneider *et al.* 2009), Pará (Mittermeier *et al.* 1978; Avila-Pires *et al.* 2010), Acre (Bernarde *et al.* 2011), and Tocantins (Pavan and Dixo 2004). Therefore, the species seems to be restricted to the Amazon basin, as also inferred from distribution maps provided by Iverson

(1992), Bour and Zaher (2005), and Rueda-Almonacid *et al.* (2007), among others. We are unaware of any previous confirming record of its presence in Mato Grosso State (but see São Pedro *et al.* 2009).

On 31/October/2007, during faunal inventories at "Parque Estadual Igarapés do Juruena" (08°54' S, 59°06' W), municipality Colniza, two juvenile specimens of *M. gibba* were collected (UFMT 6244; UFMT 6245) in a small forest stream (locally called "igarapé"). On 18/May/2008, an adult male of the same species (UFMT 6868) was captured in a small stream at "Dardanelos Mineradora" (10°08' S, 59°25' W), a mining project situated in the municipality Aripuanã, contacting northwards with Colniza. To our knowledge, Aripuanã currently represents the southwesternmost record for the species. In both municipalities, local streams are tributaries of the Aripuanã River, which belongs to the Aripuanã-Madeira sub-basin of the Amazon River Basin.

Another representative of the genus *Mesoclemmys* here shown to be present in northwestern Mato Grosso State is *M. raniceps*. As *M. gibba*, it is widely distributed in the Orinoco River and Amazonas River basins, being known from Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil (Iverson 1992; McCord *et al.* 2001; Bour and Zaher 2005). In Brazil, it was until now restricted to the states of Acre, Rondônia, Amazonas, and Pará, as suggested by general distribution maps, as those provided by Iverson (1992), McCord *et al.* (2001), Bour and Zaher (2005), and Rueda-Almonacid *et al.* (2007).

On 11/July/2006, an adult female of *M. raniceps* (UFMT 4888) was found inside a burrow near a small stream, affluent of the left margin of the Aripuanã river (10°09' S, 59°26' W), municipality Aripuanã. Another individual of *M. raniceps* (UFMT 7034) was found road killed on an unpaved road on 01/May/2008, during faunal inventories at "Parque Estadual Igarapés do Juruena", municipality Colniza (see above). Only carapace and skeleton of this specimen were collected and later deposited in the vertebrate collection at UFMT. Additionally, two juvenile specimens were collected (in 28/February/2011, UFMT 9085, and in 02/March/2011, UFMT 9086) near the left margin of the Juruena River, at Fazenda São Nicolau (09°48' S, 58°16' W), municipality Cotriguaçu.

Although strongly associated to aquatic habitats, individuals of *Mesoclemmys* spp. are frequently found while crossing dry habitats or interfluves. The wide distribution

of *Mesoclemmys vanderhaegei*, for example, may be a result of the ability of these turtles to perform terrestrial displacements between water bodies (sometimes crossing interfluves), especially at the end of the rainy season. Indeed, individuals of *M. vanderhaegei* were found in dry places in nearly half of the records reported herein. Reasons to do so probably include the search for empty territories or for suitable places to spend the dry season, among others.

Terrestrial displacements were already reported for other freshwater turtles, such as the chelid *Chelodina longicollis* (Roe and Georges 2008; Rees *et al.* 2009), and the emydids *Trachemys scripta* (Gibbons *et al.* 1990), *Emydoidea blandingii* (Ross and Anderson 1990), and *Clemmys guttata* (Haxton and Berrill 2001). Presumably, most freshwater turtles have the skill to migrate across land, and effectively do it when resources become meager in their original aquatic habitats (Kramer 1995; Milan and Melvin 2001). Due to this ability, and also considering the confluence of at least three distinct ecosystems and river basins in the state of Mato Grosso, representatives of Chelidae probably have even wider ranges than presently indicated by available data.

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